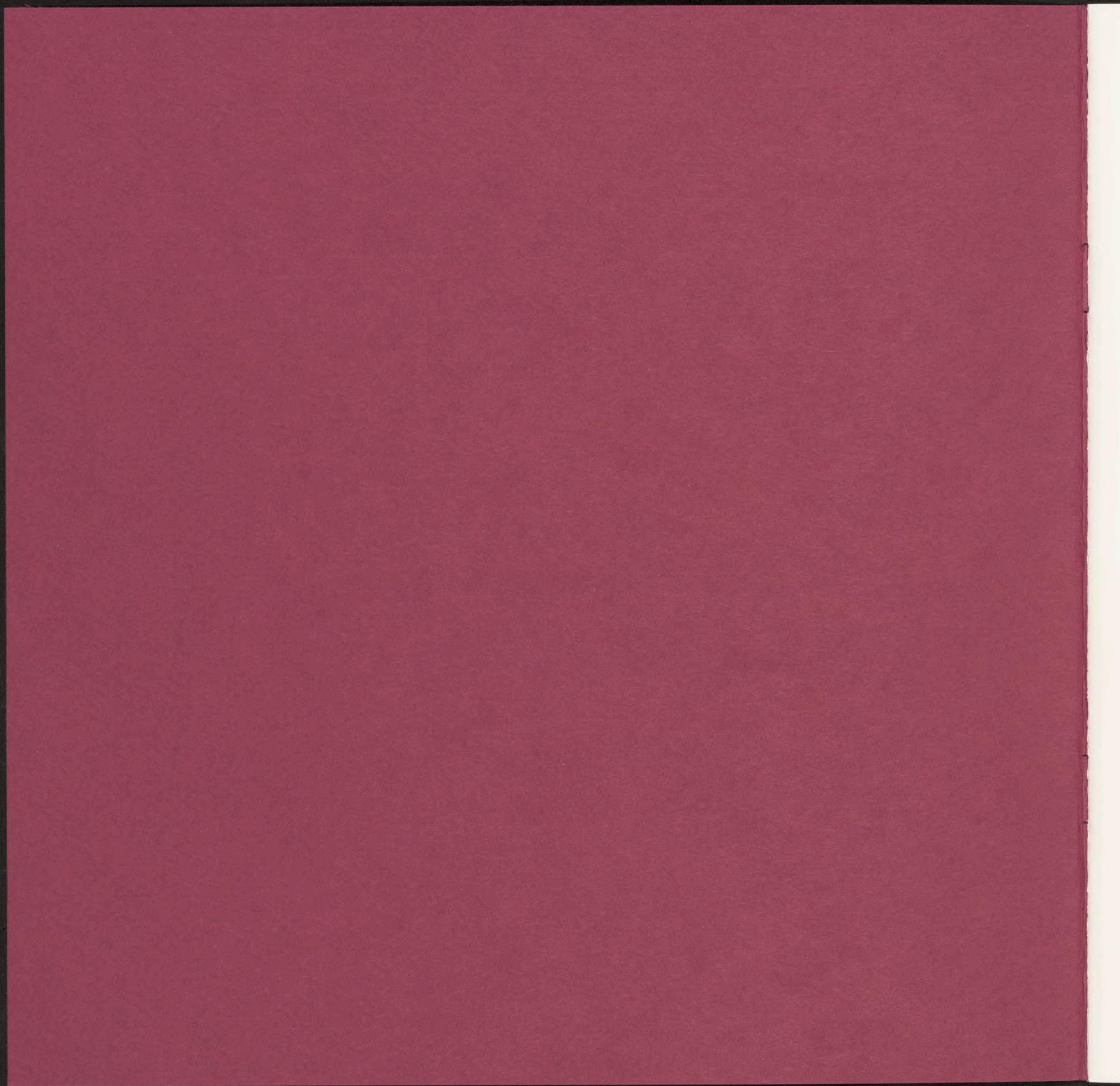


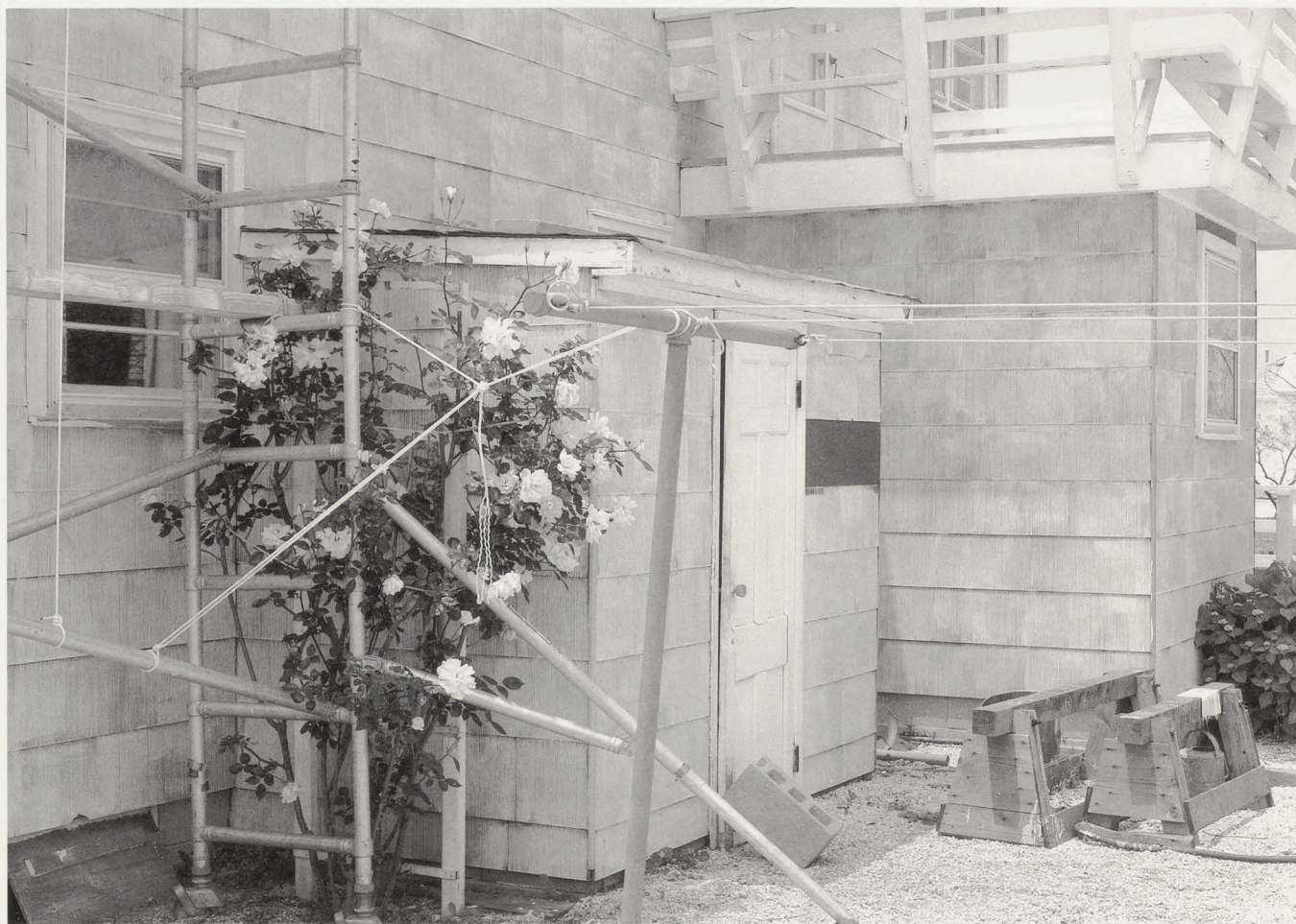
GREGORY CONNIFF



GREGORY CONNIFF

DECEMBER 19, 1979 – FEBRUARY 3, 1980

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D.C.



23. *Loveladies, New Jersey*

GREG CONNIFF, THOUGH HE APPEARS on the face of it to belong securely within a rather conservative and purist mode of straight photography—the mode which adheres to narrow technical conventions both in framing and printing the image—comes actually out of a notably unphotographic stance. He grew up in a family and environment which valued literature above visual expression; he studied law, attained the bar, and intended to practice. Finally he did surrender to his own latent urge to image-making; he gave in and impulsively apprenticed himself for a year to William Weege at Wisconsin's Jones Road Print Shop. Through this intense if belated exposure to lithography and related printmaking, graphic media quite separate from photography, Conniff turned in earnest to photography. He taught himself darkroom technique, gradually refining and clarifying his own style.

Conniff's style isn't at first perceived as strikingly distinctive or in any way eccentric. But as we examine the photographs, most taken in summer-place or suburban parts of the Eastern United States, we gradually discern a bent of mind characterized by a vivid concern with the *relational structure* of things. Conniff explores ways in which pictorial structure and linear/planar/volumetric interconnections can engage both our emotional and our ethical responses to the world. The artist has intuitively understood a particular truth about the aesthetics of black and white photographs; namely, in this medium specifically, we seem to want to see a certain complexity, or ambivalence, especially in unpeopled images. It is as though we are not satisfied in this art form with any less ambivalence and equivocation and potential for discovery than we get unbidden from nature itself.

We do not at this moment in the development of photographic style respond so fully in black and white contemporary images to plain iconic content or unashamedly reductive formats, as we might with other media. The impetus of Paul Outerbridge or Man Ray or Weston's still lifes seems to take its current effect in color photography; black and white work deals more subtly with the psychology of humans portrayed and the psychology of their environments. Walker Evans bridged the gap between straight documentary or journalistic photography and the aesthetically self-conscious still-life or constructivist approach; his instincts enabled him automatically to create abstractly successful images *no matter what his subject*; he was so inveterately curious about actual life and people and places that he escaped the hothouse atmosphere of 'art' photography while maintaining its delicacy of structure. After Evans, the more fluid and informal style of Robert Frank assisted in the evolution of American photographic style, which has continued to find increasingly varied and sophisticated means of combining the 'factual' and the 'poetic.' When an artist can find a new way of forging this synthesis in the medium of black and white photography, we recognize this particularity as constituting the works' essential character, and it is this synthesis through which above all, we consciously or unconsciously gauge the success of a given body of work. We cannot finally describe or verbally locate the incredibly subtle nature of the real 'newness' of a successful new synthetic act, but we can describe structure in photography and learn a great deal in so doing.

Conniff's work falls into sets and sub-sets of compositional and existential themes. He works at intervals in variously featured places but, oddly enough, consciously strives to create images which are not immediately identifiable in terms of geographic characteristics. He is intent upon discovering or reinventing feelings about places specific to his own past, as if to externalize his history. But he is not commanding the viewer to retrace with him the scenes of associative and nostalgic investment. On the contrary, the artist feels that the more the works are perceived by others as *abstractly* evocative, or at least universally sensible, the better. And for all the emotive overtones here, we don't in fact necessarily see in these photographs even the distinguishing characteristics among Wisconsin, coastal New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. This slight homogeneity of tenor is quite intended.

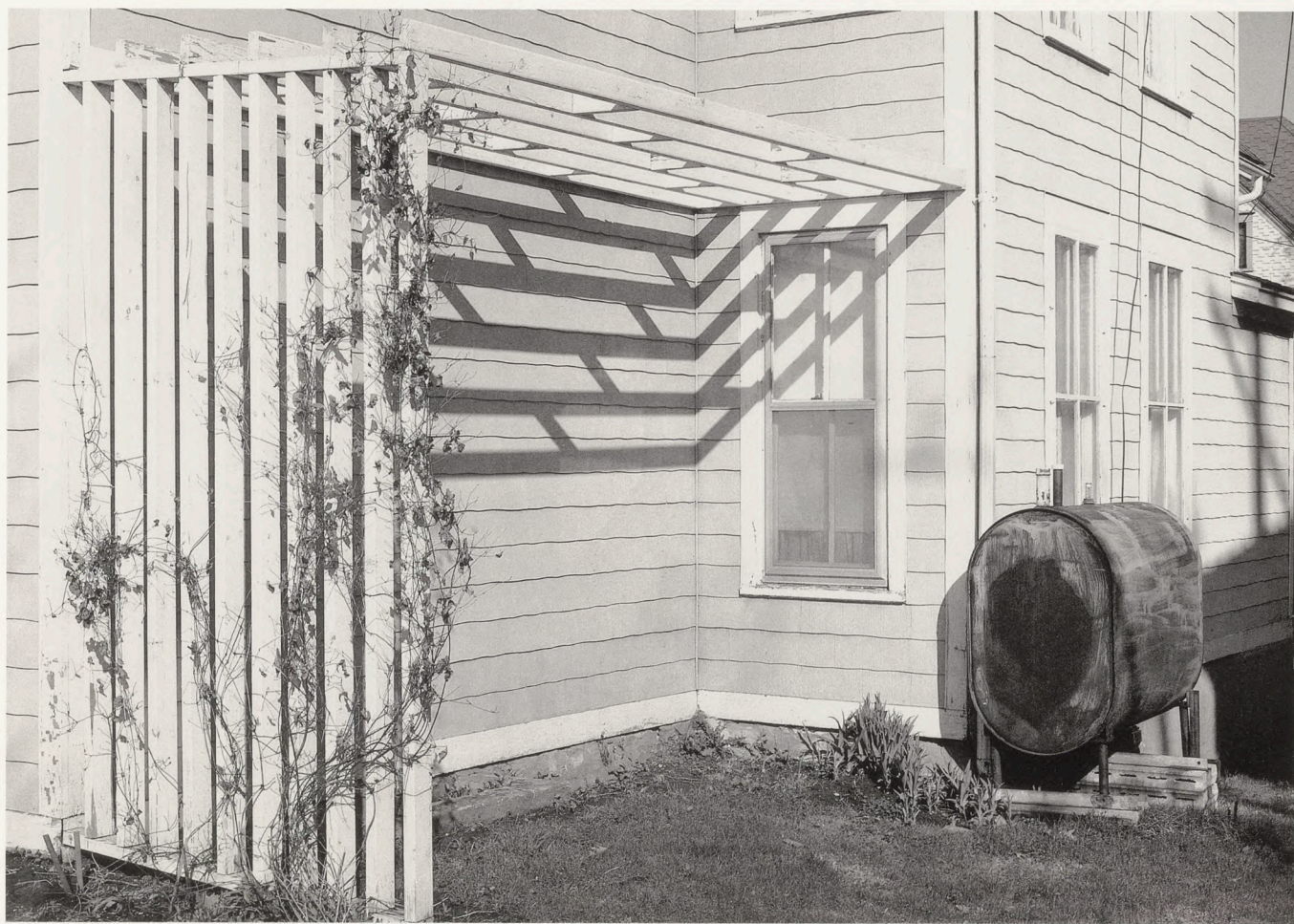
In the landscape photographs presented here, Conniff employs a large gamut of compositional and tonal approaches to photography. In some works, the illusion of drawing on the surface—as in catalogue no. 23, with a layering of incident behind a kind of frontal grid, or asymmetric lattice—creates a look which is highly aestheticized, highly abstract. In others, on the contrary, Conniff frames reductive, cubist-like blocks, or irregular but still puzzle-like units deployed on a relatively simple surface. Others, such as no. 25, use the simple device of opening up to an old-fashioned vanishing point; and some of the photographs (no. 21 in particular) actually seem to be *entirely drawn* with light and shadow. All of these various compositional schemes are of course basic to the repertory of straight photography; we could analyze the work of Lee Friedlander, Gary Winogrand, or John Gossage and find similar patterns. But Conniff has arrived at his own vocabulary independently of photography's familiar conventions and history. He says of himself that he has 'retraced the history of the medium in my own work. But in ignorance.' He is not embarrassed by his former ignorance—but freely acknowledges it. And now he is rapidly making up for what he didn't know, and he feels confident enough to receive influence. Like others of his generation, he frankly acknowledges the importance of Evans.

Conniff's bringing to black and white photography the acute visual sensibility of the draughtsman, while remaining firmly committed to the real physical world recorded in all its intractable complexity and surprisingness, lends to his work a special aura of civilisation. He manages to stop short of cloying or boring 'beautiffulness' or 'arrangedness,' yet he does not, as so many contemporary artists in the medium do, insist upon a seemingly bland (but really aggressive) ugliness, in an assertion of indifference to order or ingratiating detail. Much accepted contemporary black and white photography courts 'accident' but finally merely obtains the indecipherableness always potential to the medium. What Conniff achieves is a synthesis of the complex, even the chaotic, and the emotionally manageable.

Jane Livingston



24. *Madison, Wisconsin*



22. *Madison, Wisconsin*



16. *Madison, Wisconsin*

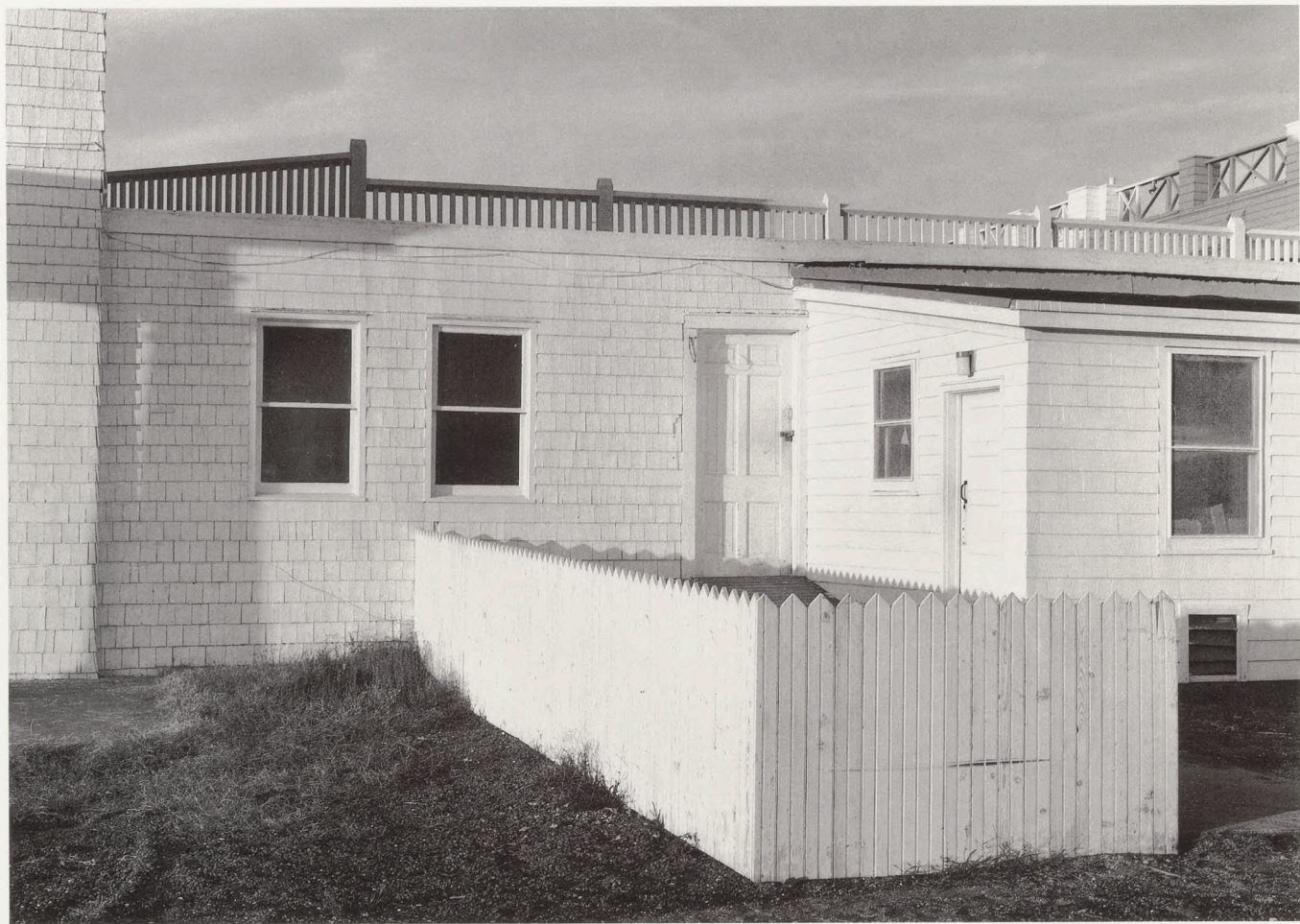


17. *Madison, Wisconsin*





29. *Madison, Wisconsin*



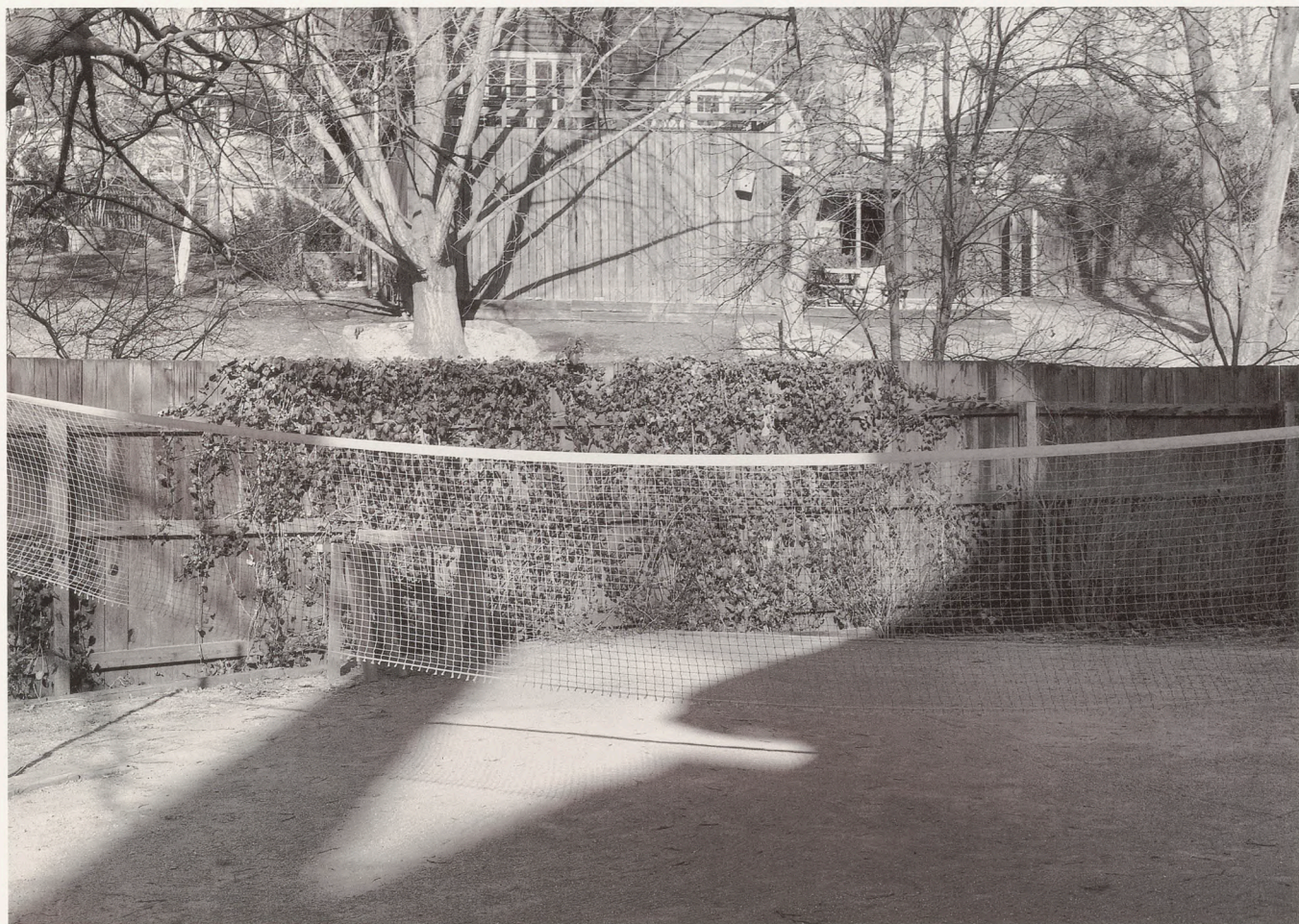
38. *Monmouth Beach, New Jersey*



25. Bay Head, New Jersey



20. *Luna Pier, Michigan*

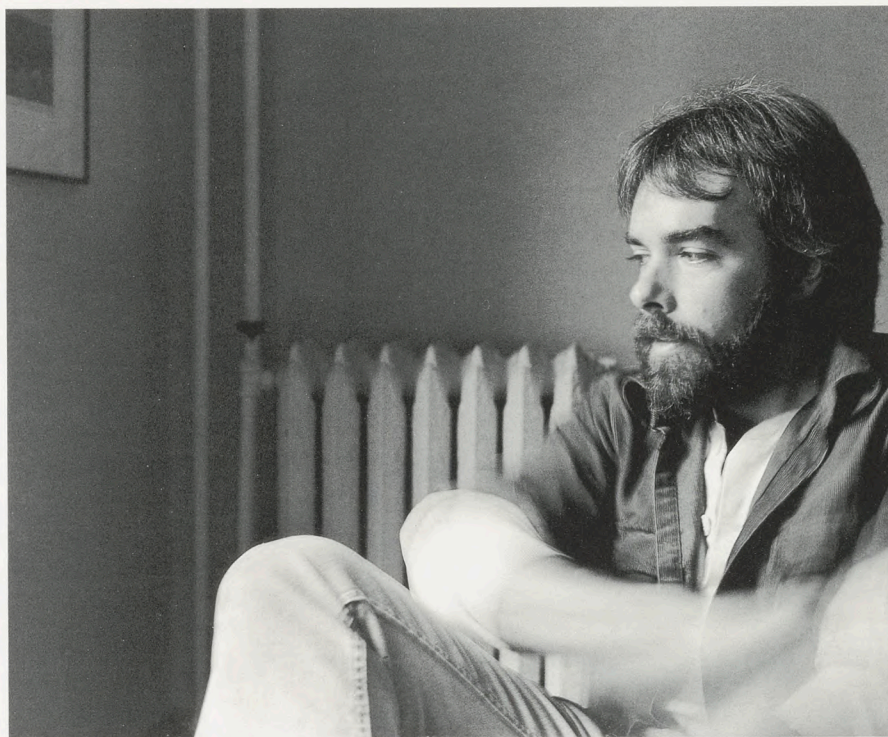


21. *Washington, D.C.*

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

All photographs are selenium-toned black and white prints on 16 x 20 inch Ilford Ilfobrom paper; image dimensions are 12 x 16 inches, height preceding width.

1. *National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.*, 1978
2. *National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.*, 1978
3. *National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.*, 1978
4. *National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.*, 1978
5. *National Arboretum, Washington, D.C.*, 1978
6. *Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts*, 1979
7. *Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts*, 1979
8. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
9. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
10. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
11. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
12. *Ship Bottom, New Jersey*, 1979
13. *Long Beach Island, New Jersey*, 1979
14. *Barneget Light, New Jersey*, 1979
15. *Bay Head, New Jersey*, 1978
16. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
17. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
18. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
19. *Woods Hole, Massachusetts*, 1979
20. *Luna Pier, Michigan*, 1979
21. *Washington, D.C.*, 1979
22. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
23. *Loveladies, New Jersey*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
24. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
25. *Bay Head, New Jersey*, 1978
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
26. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
27. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
28. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
29. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
30. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
31. *Barneget Light, New Jersey*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
32. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
33. *Franklin, New York*, 1979
34. *Lavalette, New Jersey*, 1979
35. *Franklin, New York*, 1979
36. *Long Beach Island, New Jersey*, 1979
37. *Normandy Beach, New Jersey*, 1978
38. *Monmouth Beach, New Jersey*, 1978
39. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
40. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
41. *Madison, Wisconsin*, 1979
Courtesy Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.



PHOTOGRAPH OF GREGORY CONNIFF BY MEGAN CAMPBELL

GREGORY CONNIFF

- 1944 Born Jersey City, New Jersey.
- 1960-72 Worked part-time as free-lance commercial photographer.
- 1966 Received A.B. in Government, Columbia University, New York, New York.
- 1969 Received LL.B., University of Virginia School of Law, Charlottesville, Virginia.
- 1969-70 Served as VISTA volunteer with Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Atlanta, Georgia.
- 1971 Apprenticed independently with William Weege, Jones Road Print Shop, Barneveld, Wisconsin.
- 1971-78 Lectured and consulted widely on "Art and the Law."
- 1972 Initiated private law practice specializing in dealing with the problems of artists and writers.
Photograph reproduced in *Art Week*, vol. 3, no. 45, Dec. 30, 1972, p. 10.
- 1973 Individual exhibition, Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
Group exhibition, "19 Portfolios," Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- 1974 Individual exhibition, University of Wisconsin, Rock County, Wisconsin.
Group exhibitions, "Focuserie," Erie Art Center, Erie, Pennsylvania, and "Radius," Burpee Art Museum, Rockford, Illinois.
- 1976-78 Organized graduate-level symposium, in conjunction with the Art Department, to prepare artists for practical management of their business affairs, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
- 1977 Group exhibitions, Gallery 853, and Sunprint Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin.
- 1978 Group exhibitions, "Presidents Invitational," and "Recent Acquisitions," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
Suspended law practice to concentrate on photographic pursuits.
- 1979 Received Wisconsin State Arts Board Fellowship in Photography.
Individual exhibition, Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
Two-person exhibition, with Steven Agard, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.
Group exhibitions, "Wisconsin Invitational," Wustum Museum, Racine, Wisconsin; "Wisconsin Photographers," Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; "Self-Portraits," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
Individual exhibition, Diane Brown Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Lives Madison, Wisconsin.

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

TRUSTEES

Mrs. Albert Abramson
 Mrs. Melvin Alper
 Mrs. Philip Amram
 Mr. Smith Bagley
 Mrs. Marion Barry
 Mrs. Bernhard G. Bechhoefer
 Mrs. Louisa Biddle
 Mr. Niles W. Bond, *Secretary*
 Mrs. Daniel J. Boorstin
 Mrs. Philip Brown
 Mr. Oliver T. Carr, Jr.
 Mr. Lisle C. Carter, Jr.
 Mrs. John T. Collins, *ex officio*
 Mr. Leo A. Daly, III
 Mrs. Robert Dudley, *ex officio*
 Mr. John D. Firestone
 The Honorable William H. G. FitzGerald
 Mr. Lee M. Folger, *Treasurer*
 Mr. Carl M. Freeman
 Mr. Marvin Gerstin, *ex officio*
 Mr. John H. Hall, *2nd Vice President*
 Mr. George E. Hamilton, Jr.
 Dr. Armand Hammer
 Mr. Hadlai A. Hull
 Mr. Hugh N. Jacobsen
 Mr. Freeborn G. Jewett, Jr., *1st Vice President*
 Mr. Gilbert H. Kinney
 Mr. Bernard Koteen
 Mr. David Lloyd Kreeger, *President*
 Mrs. Delano Lewis
 Mrs. Stacy Lloyd
 Mrs. John A. Logan
 Mrs. Leonard H. Marks
 Mr. Charles McKittrick
 The Honorable J. William Middendorf, II
 Mrs. John U. Nef
 Mr. Mandell J. Ourisman
 Mr. Maxwell Oxman
 Mrs. Donald Petrie
 Mr. Michael M. Rea
 Mrs. Walter Salant

Mr. B. Francis Saul, II
 Mr. Ray Scherer
 Mr. Frederic W. Schwartz, Jr.
 Mr. Leonard L. Silverstein
 Mr. Adolph Slaughter
 Mrs. John Lewis Smith
 Mr. Carleton B. Swift, Jr.
 Mrs. Maurice B. Tobin
 Mrs. Wynant D. Vanderpool, Jr.
 Mr. Robert L. Walsh, Jr.
 Mrs. Brainard H. Warner, III
 Mrs. John H. Warner
 Mr. J. Burke Wilkinson
 Mr. Curtin Winsor, Jr., *Assistant Treasurer*
 The Honorable Stanley Woodward
 Mrs. David N. Yerkes

TRUSTEES EMERITI

Mr. Frederick M. Bradley
 Mr. Gordon Gray
 Mr. Corcoran Thom, Jr.

STAFF

Peter C. Marzio, *Director*
 Jane Livingston, *Associate Director*
 Edward J. Nygren, *Curator of Collections*
 Linda C. Simmons, *Associate Curator of Collections*
 Clair Z. List, *Associate Curator of Contemporary Art for the Washington Region*
 Frances Fralin, *Assistant Curator*
 Marti Mayo, *Coordinator of Exhibitions*
 Martha Pennigar, *Curatorial Assistant*
 Pamela Lawson, *Secretary to the Associate Director*
 Elizabeth Punsalan, *Secretary to the Curator of Collections*
 Susan P. Williams, *Registrar*
 Shelby White Cave, *Associate Registrar*
 Lynn Kahler, *Registrar's Assistant*
 Robert Scott Wiles, *Conservator*
 Fern Bleckner, *Conservation Assistant*
 Anthony Blazys, *Preparator*
 Howard Halle, *Assistant Preparator*
 Anthony Wells, *Assistant Preparator*
 Peter C. Fleps, *Carpenter*
 Monroe Carr, *Installation Assistant*
 Kenneth Gibson, *Installation Assistant*
 Barbara Moore, *Curator of Education*
 Susan Tillett, *Education Officer*
 Nancy Eickel, *Education Assistant*
 Maureen Ankner, *Workshop and Graphics Coordinator*
 Sheila Muccio, *Director for Development and Membership*
 Sandra Briscuso, *Development Associate*
 Jennifer Corcoran, *Development Secretary*
 Gwen Goffe, *Director of Finance and Planning*
 Martha Baird, *Grants Administrator*
 William O. Snead, *Director of Building Projects*
 Carolyn Campbell, *Public Relations*
 Lorna Tilley, *Special Events*
 Ann Kerwin, *Administrative Assistant*
 Joan Kisber, *Secretary to the Director*
 Ellen Wright, *Corcoran Shop Manager*
 Merrick Murdock, *Corcoran Shop Assistant*
 Donald H. Cochran, *Security Officer*
 Einar Gomo, *Building Superintendent*
 Jesse Martin, *Sergeant of the Guard*

This exhibition is one of a series of individual photography exhibitions supported by Polaroid Corporation and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal agency. The series is co-organized by Associate Director and Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin.

The Wisconsin Arts Board, with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts, has generously added support for this individual project.

Copyright © 1979 The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 79-56122

Fifteen hundred copies of this catalogue were printed and bound by The Acme Printing Company, Medford, Massachusetts.

Designed at The Hollow Press, Washington, D.C.



CORCORAN

GALLERY OF ART SCHOOL OF ART
SEVENTEENTH STREET &
NEW YORK AVENUE NORTHWEST
WASHINGTON DC 20006